

## EARLY RECOLLECTIONS OF LAKE GENEVA (BIG FOOT LAKE), WISCONSIN

BY GEORGE MANIERRE<sup>1</sup>

My grandfather, William Reid, came to Chicago in 1840. At that time, although a mere village of 4,479 inhabitants, it was in the midst of a speculative fever and was even then speaking of its certain future greatness and of Lake Geneva (Big Foot Lake) as a probable summer resort for its citizens. My grandfather came of a well-known family whose ancestor with his tenants fought at the battle of Bothwell Bridge, June 22, 1679, under the flag "For God, King, and Covenant," and who inherited through him the estate of Kilbryd, situated near Glasgow, Scotland. William Reid inherited wealth which he, as a barrister, increased, so that at about middle life he made up his mind to retire. Unfortunately for his family his investments proved unsuccessful, and after the loss of the greater part of his fortune he came to America and started anew. When he came to Chicago he had a relatively large sum of money, which, if invested in Chicago, might eventually have increased to great wealth; but he was stricken by the Lake Geneva fever and went there with his family, locating at the head of the lake. He invested largely in land by the lake and on Big Foot Prairie, buying a large tract of land on the higher ground and about seventy acres along the lake.

My grandmother, Mary Drew, came of a cultivated family which was distantly related to the family of the Duke of Hamilton. Her niece was the first wife of William Gladstone, the English statesman. Mention is made of these things to show the change from the ease of their former mode

<sup>1</sup>The author's reminiscences of the Manierre family have been printed in Volume 8 Number 3 of the Illinois State Historical Society *Publications*.



HOUSE OF WILLIAM REID AT THE HEAD OF LAKE GENEVA

From a water color in the Wisconsin Historical Library painted in 1842 by Mrs. James Drew

of living to the vicissitudes which locating on the frontier entailed.

My grandparents had nine children, five boys and four girls, part of whom were born in the log house at the head of the lake. This house stood about two hundred feet from shore at the bottom of a rise of ground known as the Potawatomi Indian burial ground, upon which site the electric railway depot now stands. I remember as a boy digging Indian relics out of this hill. The house was neatly built of logs and had two large wings; in the center of one room was a fireplace suitable for burning large logs. Among the early settlers in the neighborhood at this time who had land and houses at the head of the lake were the Van Slykes,<sup>2</sup> the Mohrs,<sup>3</sup> the Russells,<sup>4</sup> and the Douglasses.<sup>5</sup>

Here the children grew up with the ordinary opportunities of farmers' children and had no better advantages; and years later my cousin, Jessie (Reid) Donaldson, my brother, Will, and I used to come here to enjoy the beautiful surroundings of grandfather's place. Will and I had a little pony called Jenny and a wagon which we used to drive to The Corners for mail. Whenever Jenny wanted to go into the barn or whenever we took her to the blacksmith's to be shod, she had a funny trick of rapping on the door with her feet.

I remember the Baptist people used frequently to come down to the lake in front of my grandfather's house, and that

<sup>2</sup>James Van Slyke made the first settlement near the Potawatomi Indian village in that place which later became the town of Walworth. He built a cabin and moved his family there from Geneva in the fall of 1836. Mrs. Van Slyke is supposed to have been the only white woman who spent that winter there. Many stories are told of the courage she displayed in this frontier community.

<sup>3</sup>Matthias Mohr was one of the earliest residents of Walworth County, settling on part of the Van Slyke claim at the head of Lake Geneva in 1837. He later went to Kansas where he died in 1887. Glenwood Springs Park now stands on the site of his farm.

<sup>4</sup>Marcus and Robert Russell settled at the west end of Lake Geneva in 1837. Robert Russell later moved to Iowa. Marcus Russell died in 1875.

<sup>5</sup>Christopher Douglass was born in Connecticut in 1797 and moved to Wisconsin in 1837, settling on Big Foot Prairie. In 1842 he moved to the town of Walworth, where he kept a hotel for several years. In 1857 he took up his residence at the head of Lake Geneva where he died in 1866.

the minister would there duck the women under the water, according to their custom. My aunt, with great sympathy, would lead the women into the house, where they could change their clothes.

South of the house, where a stream ran through the inlet into the lake, was a marsh, in the center of which was an island. Here in those early days deer were often to be seen. Prairie chickens were plentiful on Big Foot Prairie, and in the spring wild pigeons, now extinct, flew over it in countless numbers. Woodcock, ruffed grouse, and squirrels were also numerous. In the lake there was a large quantity of game fish, among which were the cisco. These were seen only during the last days of May or the early days of June when they came from the depths of the lake to the shallow water to feed on the May flies and to spawn. Of the wild life existing at that time, only a fraction now remains.

Matthias Mohr owned the old sawmill on the rising ground at the south end of the marsh. The race was fed by a large brook that emptied into the marsh. This beautiful spot, surrounded by bushes and trees, was often visited by me. The old wheel was still, but it was pleasant to listen to the sound of the clear, cold water of the brook as it rushed over the dismantled wheel to its outlet in the marsh. This brook was afterward dammed up and used for raising brook trout.

Numerous beautiful springs were to be found running from the higher ground to the lake. About half a mile north of the house was a small schoolhouse where I remember being spelled down by a little girl. The house was afterward occupied by an English laborer by the name of Blackwell, and I have his son Bill in pleasant remembrance. The road past the schoolhouse at the foot of a high bluff ran south by Douglass' Mill and north to the farm belonging to my grandfather. From Douglass' Mill,<sup>6</sup> which was built by C. L.

<sup>6</sup> C. L. Douglass, son of Christopher Douglass, was born in New York November 4, 1827, and came to Wisconsin with his father in 1837. In 1857 he built and equipped Big Foot Mills which he continued to operate for thirty years. He died January 6, 1898.

Douglass and first used as a sawmill and then as a gristmill, we used to go on up a very steep hill to the road going west to The Corners, about three miles from my grandfather's house, where at that early day the mail was obtained. The village located where the mill once stood has since been called Fontana.<sup>7</sup>

Later we went to Walworth for the mail, taking the road running south. The town of Walworth was founded in 1836 by James Van Slyke who made his residence at the head of the lake. The only residents there about 1840 were Christopher Douglass and sons, Marcus Russell, James Van Slyke, Matthias Mohr, and William Reid. Matthias Mohr purchased 50 acres in the town of Walworth in 1840, and in 1843 he purchased 38 acres more. In 1840 William Reid purchased 960 $\frac{1}{4}$  acres, in 1840 Marcus Russell purchased 80 acres, and in 1841, Christopher Douglass purchased 480 acres, all in the town of Walworth.

The village of Walworth had a store, a blacksmith shop, the Red Lion Hotel, and the Brick Church. In the Brick Church cemetery are buried today the remains of my grandfather and my grandmother and a number of their children. The Red Lion Hotel was used by many people passing on the main road from town to town in Wisconsin.

A short distance to the north of grandfather's house was the sugar bush. This was at the bottom of the high hills going north up to Russell's. Near the place stood the old Potawatomi village and cornfields which Mrs. Kinzie in her book *Wau Bun* speaks of visiting in 1831.<sup>8</sup> I well remember see-

<sup>7</sup> Fontana, a summer resort at the head of Lake Geneva, covers the site of the old Potawatomi village and is part of the old Van Slyke claim. It was purchased of Van Slyke in 1838 by Matthias Mohr, Amos Bailey, and Dr. Henry Clark, who platted and named the village.

<sup>8</sup> Mrs. John H. Kinzie, *Wau Bun, the early day in the North-west* (New York, 1856), 318-22. Mrs. Kinzie in company with her husband, U. S. sub-Indian agent at Fort Winnebago, was making the trip from Chicago to Fort Winnebago (Portage) in 1831 when she visited Big Foot's village. She describes the chief as a "large, rawboned, ugly Indian with a countenance bloated by intemperance, and with a sinister, unpleasant expression."

ing the Indian trail back of the house leading up to the higher land in the sugar bush.

The country at the head of the lake was filled with large butternut, walnut, hickory, basswood, ash, sugar maple, white-, black-, and burr-oak trees. The sugar bush, through which a clear, cold brook ran murmuring to its outlet in the lake, was notable for its many butternut trees and was one of the most beautiful spots that could be seen anywhere about the lake. I remember well the large oak tree near my grandfather's house in which a canoe had been placed holding the remains of a relative<sup>9</sup> of Big Foot,<sup>10</sup> an Indian chief after whom Big Foot Prairie was named. The wood of the softer trees near the farm was used by the Reid family for the rails from which snake fences were made. I remember my father and driver taking stakes from a snake fence and putting them in the mud for my mother to stand on.

In the early days my father and mother in going to Lake Geneva had to go by wagon. When the railroads were built, they took a train to Turner Junction (now West Chicago) located thirty miles west of Chicago, and from there took a wagon to Lake Geneva. Later they went by the same railroad (the Northwestern) to Harvard Junction and from there by wagon to the head of the lake.

At Harvard was located a hotel owned by Elbridge G. Ayer,<sup>11</sup> the father of Edward E. Ayer of this city. This hotel

<sup>9</sup>This was Big Foot's son, who died about 1830. The body was encased in a rude coffin and fastened to the limbs of a tree overlooking the lake. Big Foot is said to have given as his reason for this mode of burial that his son had been unusually fond of lake scenery, and he would thus enjoy a fine view of it from the land to which he had gone.

<sup>10</sup>Big Foot was the last chief of his band to rule his people in their own land. In 1827, when the Winnebago were on the war path, Big Foot, a sturdy hater of the whites, tried to incite the Potawatomi to join the northern Indians. He was prevented by measures taken by Gov. Lewis Cass which culminated in the treaty of September 15, 1827. Being bound by former treaties, Big Foot remained neutral during the Black Hawk War. By the treaty of 1832 the territory of the Potawatomi and their allies, the Chippewa and the Ottawa, comprising southeastern Wisconsin, passed to the United States government. Big Foot refused to sign the treaty until the other chiefs had done so.

<sup>11</sup>Elbridge Gerry Ayer, born in Haverhill, Mass., July 25, 1813, came to Wisconsin in 1836. In 1847 he moved to Walworth, going from there to McHenry County, Ill. in 1857, where he founded the town of Harvard. There for eighteen



was a few feet from the track and its dining-room furnished meals to the people traveling on that road. This dining-room was known all over the West, for at that time there was no other that could compete with it. All the vegetables, meat, poultry, and pastry were cooked in the most appetizing manner and the products furnished for the table came fresh from Mr. Ayer's farm. My father and mother, my brother Will, and I have often taken meals at this hotel on our way from the Junction to the lake. The village of Harvard was afterward beautified by Mr. Ayer's son, Edward E. Ayer, who planted fourteen hundred trees about it. Most of these are standing today and are an evidence of the public spirit of the donor, which is seen in Chicago in his activities in behalf of the Newberry Library, Field Museum, and other institutions.<sup>12</sup>

My grandmother's brother, James Drew, a wealthy barrister from London, England, and his wife visited his sister at the head of the lake in 1842. At this time Mrs. Drew made a small water-color drawing of the house and its vicinity which has recently been placed in the Wisconsin Historical Library.

My recollections of Geneva go back to the early fifties. I can remember going with my uncle in a rowboat from the head to the foot of the lake, some eight miles. At that time there were no steamboats on the lake and an unbroken forest covered its shores. The high ground bordering the lake was

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years he and his wife conducted one of the best hotels in the state. During the Civil War they gave without pay food, lodging, and other assistance to the wounded Union soldiers detained in that vicinity. On the occasion of their golden wedding in 1885 Gov. James Lewis of Wisconsin, on behalf of the Wisconsin soldiers, presented to Mr. and Mrs. Ayer a gold cup, now in the museum of the Wisconsin Historical Society. The inscription is as follows: "Presented to Mr. and Mrs. E. G. Ayer by the Wisconsin soldiers as a token of remembrance and appreciation of the many acts of kindness toward them during the dark days of the Rebellion, from 1861 to 1865, Oct. 29, 1885."

<sup>12</sup> Edward Everett Ayer, of Chicago, son of Mr. and Mrs. Elbridge G. Ayer, has long been connected with enterprises relating to arts and letters. He is a director of the Newberry Library, of the Field Museum, and of the Art Institute. He himself has one of the finest private libraries in the United States which contains manuscripts relating to the early history of North America, the Indians, Mexico, the West Indies, and the Philippines.

about 175 feet above the beach line. The depth of the lake has since been found to be from 80 to 181 feet. The lake is eight miles long and from one to two miles wide. It empties into the Fox River by a deep creek at the east end.

My mother, Ann Hamilton Reid, daughter of William Reid, was born in Glasgow, Scotland, October 23, 1823. She was married to my father, George Manierre, after whom I was named, in Detroit in 1842.



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